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S E R M O N ,

ON

THE PRINCIPLES OF RETALIATION,


PRIVATE REVENGE,

AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES.


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Savannah:
PRINTED BY THOMAS PURSE.
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1839.

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B1645

 THE following Discourse was delivered by the Author to his congregation, in consequence of the murder of THOMAS E. HARDEE, Esq., in the street of St. Mary's, by CHARLES ROSSIGNOL. And it is now, at the request of many who heard it, made public: through the hope that it may be useful, beyond the limits of the sphere for which it was originally intended.

St. Mary's, Sept. 18, 1839.



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S E R M O N .

THE portions of Scripture, my friends, from which I shall, at this time, address you, are the following :

“The discretion of a man deferreth his anger, and it is his glory to pass over a transgression. But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves. See that none render evil for evil unto any *man*; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all *men*.”

These passages are from Solomon, the wisest of men; from Jesus Christ, the Son of God; and from Paul, an inspired Apostle. Did we consider these individuals simply as moralists and teachers, remarkable as they were, for wisdom, knowledge, and benevolence—maxims and injunctions from them should come to us with great weight. But they are to be regarded by us in a vastly higher light. When the wise King of Israel spake for our instruction, a greater than Solomon was there. In Christ Jesus dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily; and Paul spake as he was moved by the Holy Ghost. All these declarations and injunctions come to us then, by the direct authority of the God of Hosts. And, in substance, they amount to this: that when injury is done, instead of being resentful, anger should be deferred—that it is the glory of a man, to pass over a transgression—that personal revenge is not to be sought. We are not to retaliate upon any man, rendering evil for evil; on the contrary, we are to do good unto all men. It would seem, however, that men, in our day, think themselves greater and wiser than God. The code of morals, as here laid down, is set aside; and one of an entirely opposite character, is substituted in its stead, wholly substituted—in theory, in doctrine, in precept, and in practice. Such, too, is the thorough spirit with which it is urged, and maintained; and such is the pitch of insolence to which public sentiment has arisen, that the man who dares to obey the injunctions of God, as in these texts laid down, is regarded as an outcast from that circle of society termed *honourable*; and, by them, viewed as deserving only the pity and contempt of his species.

My friends, I deal in no exaggerated phrase—I state the fact as it is. It is in vain for any one to say, that the very opposite of

these principles are not, in our day, made generally the rule of action, and that, by those who, in most matters, acknowledge the authority of the Scriptures. Take the first part of the text, the substance of which is, that it is the part of discretion to defer anger—the glory of a man, to pass over a transgression—and this, though fraught with wisdom, and commending itself, as it would seem, to every man's conscience—by how large a portion of every community is it set aside?—and what is there in its stead? By experiment you may easily learn. Go into the street, where insults and injuries are rife; let some one of either fall upon you, whether deservedly or not—but if adopting the principle, that it is the part of discretion to defer anger, and the glory of a man to pass over a transgression.—If, I say, taking this course, you coolly retire, taking no notice of the offence, my life on it, if you are not hissed at in every street; and if opprobrium, instead of glory, does not cover your name! And do you wish to know how such a state of public sentiment is produced, and in all its strength perpetuated? Go into the family circle, that sacred, fearful place, where impressions, either for life or for death, are usually made—and what do you see—what do you hear? The children are present, passive as wax to receive impressions; but upon the occurrence of any thing wrong, is anger deferred—deferred till the offender have time for reflection? Set aside that reason, may have its sway—and that judicious conduct, and wholesome advice, may accompany the correction. Is this the case? Or rather, is it not, more frequently, anger that nerves the arm for the infliction; and a spirit rife with revenge, that, in that infliction, actuates those guides of the household? Again—as to the glory of passing by a transgression: in the same circle, the conversation turns upon a neighbour who has been insulted; but, who, siding with Solomon, did not choose to resent it—and ten to one, if “mean-spirited wretch” is not the epithet applied, both by father and *mother*, to the man, whose conduct, not only Israel's King, but the King of Heaven, has pronounced glorious! The effect of this upon that youthful circle, I need not explain. You at once readily perceive what it must be—and would that this were all. But no—*Direct precept*, on this point, is also given. The father, and to it the mother, gives her enforcing assent—the father, as he dandles his child upon his knee, speaking on the same point, is heard to say, “My son, you must never take an insult; whenever injured or insulted, as you revere the name of your father, and would be respected in the world, you must fight, and redress the wrong.” And thus it is, that in early life, children and youth begin to estimate their

companions—all men, indeed, as they do certain animals, as the phrase is, by their “pluck.” The noblest is he that quickest resents an injury, fights with most spirit, and is last to cry “enough.” Thus also, it is, that desperados are reared up for the tragic scenes, that so frequently occur around us. Approach that crowd in the street: who is that, that filled with rage, and uttering curses, is brandishing his knife, or threatening to put a bullet through the head of his companion in sports? Oh, it is one of the youthful *braves*, instructed in the modern, prevalent code. Filled with high notions of himself, a supposed insult has been given—his pride has been wounded, and he is only defending his honour; but acting out the instructions of his parents. That youthful corpse brought home to his widowed, heart-broken mother—the young man had been slandered—he was told that he must call the offender to an honourable account—they met—that was the result! That criminal about to be swung from the scaffold; a personal insult had been offered; he was not disposed to notice it; the community said, “You are no man of spirit if you don’t.” He attacked the offender—from blows it came to knives—he laid the other dead—and now the same community are about to execute him, for the very act which they themselves impelled him to do!

My friends, it is useless, nay it is criminal to disguise the matter to withhold the truth. We have arrived at a lamentable, a fearful state of things. That pew, on last Sabbath empty, to-day filled only in part, and that with mourners—those shrieks, those tears, those hearts that bleed—that scene of blood, sickening and appalling, which you have all so recently witnessed: I need not tell what they mean. The hand of the assassin has been at work. In open day in your streets—in the face of Heaven—in defiance of your laws—under the eye of your chief officer and his council, revenge has marked out and slain its victim! And God only knows to what such a state of things will bring us. You, I, or any other man, may any day, any hour, share the same fate. No man’s life—no man’s property is safe. But this deed of death—this state of uncertainty and terror, I say, fearlessly say it, is the legitimate result of the principles entertained by a large portion of this community, and for it, every man here is, in measure, responsible! But might I speak of myself:—The resolution is fixed, from this day onward my skirts shall be clear of like foul deeds. Though through the length and the breadth of the land, not another man stand up for the principles of the text—by them I will abide. And come life, come death, the opposite principles, those which I must maintain, have brought about this foul butchery—I will *unquali-*

fiedly condemn. But I shall not stand alone. I know that there are many in this city—many within these walls, who know, and acknowledge their duty, and will fearlessly do it. Do you reply, that you have already done it? And in attestation of the fact, am I referred to your late public meetings on the subject? I grant that, in this, you have done well—have nobly acted. The sympathies, deep and unaffected, which you have expressed—your heavy condemnation of the crime and the criminal—and your resolution to bring the one to justice—and, so far as in you lies, prevent a recurrence of the other; all this tells, and will tell, at home and abroad, to the honour, both of yourselves and your city. But as I believe, I must speak, and therefore I must candidly tell you, that you have done but half your duty. You have begun at the wrong end, and stopt short of the fountain-head of the evil. The *deed* you have condemned; but the *principle* you have left untouched—and until that is both brought under public reprobation, and forsaken in practice, nothing to purpose is done. So long as it is admitted that insult justifies injury—that retaliation is the proper, the honourable mode of redress—that individuals may judge of their own wrongs, and redress them in their own way. So long, I say, as this is admitted do what you will, you are just where you began. You may multiply your laws as the sand of the sea; you may surround your city with a phalanx of officers; you may set your watch at night, and place your guard by day, it matters not. Public sentiment remaining unchanged—private revenge being justified, nay, *called for*, as it now is, just so certainly as causes produce effects, your laws will be evaded, or set at defiance—and deeds of violence will be thick and dark as ever. Public sentiment has a power little short of Omnipotent. Laws without it, or against it, are a nullity. It makes and enforces—sets aside and annuls them at pleasure. And that public sentiment, as it now exists, defeats the ends of the law, and brings about its violation, I, without hesitation, affirm. Do you ask if I charge you with abetting bloody, tragic deeds, such as we this day mourn? I say that you inculcate principles, and justify measures, which as certainly produce them, as effects follow causes,—look again into your code, and see if it is not so. Are you insulted?—Resent it. Are you injured?—Redress it. Does another assault you?—Knife him! That is the principle. But carry out that principle: and to what does it lead? Saying nothing of the preposterous act of making thoughtless, passionate youth, judges *in their own cause*, of the mode of redress—and their own excited passions, the measure of the infliction. Carry out the principle, and again I ask, to what

does it lead? Look at the hundreds of rencounters and deeds of death, that, in the last few years, have occurred in our land—look at them, and tell me if it was not in perfect accordance with this principle that they occurred, and if it was not the state of public sentiment which sustains said principle, that brought them about. It has become customary, and the feeling is, that it is proper and honourable, in all these matters, to manage and dispose of our own affairs—to judge of our own wrongs, and in our own way, redress them. Does then a difficulty, say about private property, occur? Both parties believe themselves to be right. But instead of resorting to the regular process of law, or submitting the case to reference. *The popular mode* is adopted. Insults are given and returned. One step calls for another—and that again for another—from injury to injury it proceeds, until it ends in death. But is it not death upon *principle*?—the very principle you maintain? Once begun, and where is the stopping point? And mark: the community have from the first, been divided on the subject; and each party would have condemned the one with whom, in that case, they sided, if he had stopped short of all that he did. *The deed* may not be justified; but all the *steps* are which lead to it. Is a man insulted? He must resent it, or be stigmatized as mean-spirited and contemptible. But is an attack made? Upon the same principle, the man attacked not only has a *right* to return the injury, but he *must do it*. Hence it is blow for blow—the longer the worse—death ensues, and then, perchance, the community are horrified at the deed; and pour forth upon the head of the perpetrator, their heaviest maledictions.

Such is the state of things—such are the facts, in general, respecting violent measures—fatal occurrences in our country.—And to bring the matter home to the case of our lamented fellow-citizen—a man whose loss must be long and deeply felt, in this community; the same perverted public sentiment, I must maintain, was the cause of his death. God forbid that I should give the semblance of countenance to that atrocious act. To no man's mind is it more abhorrent than to mine. No man condemns, with stronger reprobation, both criminal and crime. But look at the case: is it not just as I have stated. He whose death we deplore, brings charges against two individuals, as being authors of injuries received. The course—with the gentleman himself I have nothing to do,—The course pursued by the former, I pass over: simply remarking, that, averring his innocence, and the charges being publicly made, as public sentiment was, he considered himself called upon to seek redress through the laws of honour. Steps

to that end were accordingly taken. And, even in *that case*, so fearful was the crisis to which, before adjustment, it was brought, that already did friends begin to tremble: and life seemed to flicker before the sheen of the weapons provided. But the latter—and oh that it may be the last, with which our land shall ever be cursed! Had not redress been attempted, in a manner somewhat similar to that in which it was attempted—what do you suppose would have been the state of public sentiment; and on whose head would its effervescence have been expended? As I live, I believe, that had not the perpetrator of the late bloody deed, *in some manner*, sought personal redress, he would, in the estimation of many, who are now, with commendable zeal, striving to bring him to justice, have stood lower than they ever before held, or pronounced him to be! He knew it: and hence his course. What his own feelings, independently of this state of things, might have prompted him to do, I do not pretend to say; but that the existing state of public sentiment had its influence, I fully believe—“What will Mr. Rossignol do? Will not he also, seek redress?” This was the eager, the insinuating inquiry, bandied from circle to circle! And who is there, that, acknowledging allegiance to the laws of honour, would not, in such case, feel himself called upon to arm for the combat? You say, however, that you condemn the deed, I know that you do—I fully believe that your feelings have no measure, except the deepest, and the highest that is human; and that language has no words, adequate to the expression of your sympathy on the one hand, and your condemnation on the other. But again, I would ask whether your abetting such principles, was not most legitimately calculated to bring about all that has occurred? That the general prevalence of such principles encourages, moves on, and impels to an *attack*, at least, none can dispute. But an attack: it is the beginning of the end! That the deceased would fall so foully as he did—should be so basely murdered—certainly could not have been either foreseen or expected. But if an attack were made, that one or the other should fall, was certainly a reasonable calculation: for what can satiate revenge; and who can tell what bounds excited passion will not overleap? But if either fell, was it not most likely to be he who has fallen—the one I mean, unaccustomed to the use of weapons in this kind of deed; and consequently, that all that has befallen that afflicted family, and this community should follow? To this it is, and nothing short of this, in reason, that the principle of retaliation, and of private, personal revenge results. In view, therefore, of the fearful state of things at which we have arrived; a state in which a man has

but to construe any thing into an insult, and he has a pretext to assault and kill you, has but to provoke an assault, and then, in *self-defence*, take your life. In view of this, and of what has already occurred—in view of the atrocious murder so recently, in broad day, committed, as well as the actings out of this principle elsewhere in our country—as a man, a citizen, a minister, I feel called upon, in this public manner, to *denounce* that principle. In the name, upon the authority of God, I denounce it, as involving the essence of murder—and being, through all our land, the natural, and fearfully fruitful source of contentions, rencounters, bloodshed, and violent death. And now, my friends, what say *ye* to this? Blink it as you will, it comes to what I have said: no man can deny it. In view, then, of the *end* of these ways, take your course. Is the retaliating principle just and desirable? Go on—act it out. But if you adopt the principle, for mercy's sake be consistent—take with it also the deed.

Your present course is cruel and unjust: if a man do not resent an injury, he is put in the pillory, and the darts of ridicule and scorn are thrust through his vitals. But if he do, redress involves personal attacks: and attacks have legitimate ends, the ends above described—recently witnessed. In a word, death, as every one knows, follows knifing and shooting; but for violent deaths, you *hang!* Woe then to the man, who is so unfortunate as *to be insulted*. On the one hand, the pillory—on the other, the gallows! Not doing as you would impel him, he is condemned—doing, even worse is his fate! Again then, I say be consistent. Give up your principle, or justify the deed—there is no alternative. They are cause and effect to each other: and the one as naturally and necessarily follows the other, as light follows the rising of the sun, or darkness succeeds its setting. But deeds of violence, such as have lately whelmed our city in deepest grief; and elsewhere, have stained our land with the blood of its citizens—who can justify—who can palliate—who can endure? But if these you cannot countenance, cannot endure, come over and adopt the principles of the text. From this day, this hour, will you not do it—espouse and act them out? Henceforward let it be your discretion, to defer anger—your glory, to pass over a transgression. Be ye of those, who resist not evil—who avenge not themselves; but rather are peacemakers, and ever follow that which is good. A choice you must make: it is either these—or—those. There is no middle ground.

Some will doubtless reply, that they admit the justice, the correctness, and the excellency of the Scripture principles, in the *ab-*

upon all law, human and divine, and take it myself. But this redress, if sought, is it always, even *in that way*, attained? How often does the attempt but increase the injury? The innocent, the injured, the one seeking redress—how frequently is it he that is overcome perhaps laid dead in the rencontre? And when in this manner obtained to the full, this redress—what is it? Ah, it is the end of our peace, the blight of all our joys. View yonder the victor as he retires from the gory field. He has sought redress and obtained it, has slain his antagonist—and now he retires. But in what light is he to be regarded, both by himself and others. He has become victor, by becoming chief in crime. His laurels are smeared with blood—blood is upon his hands, he cannot wash it off. Alone—he is a terror to himself; abroad—he is an object of mingled aversion, pity and contempt. To his dying day, he stoops under a load too heavy for mortals to bear—and, if still actuated by the same spirit, he meet his God, it cannot be in peace—the doom and the place of murderers must be his portion. From such redress, may God preserve us!

But whatever might be the condition of an individual alone in a community, acting out the scripture principles, this is not the question. I call upon no *individual* member of this community, tho' as an individual I shall act, even if all men forsake me—but I call upon the *whole*, the mass together, and I say that rising *en masse*, you have the matter entirely at your disposal. By the moral influence which you may exert, by the proper direction of concentrated and sound public sentiment, and the prompt and unwavering execution of your laws, it is wholly in your power to secure the rights of every citizen—make disorder ashamed, banish violence from the land, and throw a bulwark of defence around your persons and property, which nothing earthly can successfully assail. And in the name of God, and of all earthly that is sacred and dear, let me entreat you to arise in your strength, your firmness, and with undeviating purpose, in this respect, to do your duty. Too long have we trampled upon the sacred, the solemn, and positively laid down commands of the God of Heaven, and God has been giving us up to be filled with our own ways. Our principles have brought forth fruit unto death: our present state is one of our own procuring, and there is no relief nor remedy except in a return to the right path—no check to the present fearful buddings of evil, except withdrawing culture from the root of bitterness, and sending the blight of public sentiment over that which is now expanding into the same forbidden death bearing product. To the rescue then—the rescue and the adoption of the long neglected, abandon-

ed principles of the text: to this it is I call upon every one that hears me to come; take them as your own, teach them to your offspring, recommend them to others. They are peace, they are safety, they are life. But the opposite—taking them, going on in your present course, to what must you come? No, I will not be an augur of evil: I forbear to draw the veil and look beyond the present: I would not hold up the repetition of scenes of recent date, and write “yours” upon them—nor would I attempt to fathom that vortex of ruin, to which we, as a people, are tending. No, these things are for your own reflections; with yourselves, your consciences and your God, I leave them. But I would say, that the time has come when it becomes every man, woman and youth, to pause, reflect, and, with decision, act. Our dearest interests, our earthly all demand it. We have been thrown back upon an age of barbarism—shall we then continue, or shall ours be a land of laws? We call ourselves christians, and dedicate our children to God: but we train them up in the principles of him, who, from the beginning was a murderer. Long, by our principles, have we sacrificed unto Moloch. Our land has become a valley of slaughter; shall we continue our bloody rites, or shall we be worshipers of the true God—rendering unto him the fruits of peace, and deriving from him the light of his countenance and the protection of his omnipotent arm? If the latter, let us obey his voice, as in love and majesty it sounds through the text.—“The discretion of a man defereth his anger, and it is his glory to pass over a transgression. But I say unto you that ye resist not evil. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves. See that none render evil for evil unto any *man*; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves and to all men.” This is the way—walk ye in it. Then shall your peace be like a river; and your prosperity as the high, the moveless hills.

